B.S. Methodist
Lent - Mid-Week

O Love, That Will Not Let Me Go

234

LOVE

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John 3:1-17
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He came at night to see Jesus. He told his wife he was going for a walk because he couldn't sleep. He didn't tell her where he was going, because he hadn't decided that yet, or if he had decided, it was in that back compartment of the mind where complex decisions are made and then kept secret - even from the rest of the mind. After twenty minutes or so, walking along dark streets, in and out of shadows, not exactly furtively, but not deliberately either, he found himself standing in front of a house where Jesus of Nazareth was staying the night.

Nicodemus had become expert in the art of playing it safe. He was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, the high court in Jerusalem which actually governed the nation under Roman occupation. The Sanhedrin was composed of Pharisees, who were experts in the law of Moses, and Sadducees and priests. There were lawyers attached to the Sanhedrin whose job it was to interpret the law. They were called Scribes. The presiding officer was the High Priest. His name was Caiaphas.

Nicodemus's credentials were impeccable. He had become what anyone in his or any age wishes to become: respected, revered, successful. He had also become expert at playing it safe. Having been given respect because of his stature, he had become very adept at protecting his respectability in order to preserve his stature.

The difference is profound. It had been for him the middle of what later generations would call a mid-life crisis. The fire had begun to diminish. The passion which had given birth in him to high personal ideals and higher hopes for his nation had been tempered by the cold reality of Roman occupation. The deep love of life expressed in marriage, parenthood, friendship, vocation - had moderated and diminished and turned into a modest "getting-by." The purity of his devotion to God, had been modified by the necessities of surviving as an aristocrat under the suspicious eyes of the Romans. Nicodemus didn't take chances. He did what was expected of him and expected little of life. You could almost say Nicodemus didn't feel deeply enough about anything to call it love: certainly not deeply enough to take risks.

So it was at night that he came to talk with Jesus of Nazareth. And Jesus of Nazareth, carpenter, itinerant rabbi, told Nicodemus the Pharisee, that he needed a rebirth in his life. Frederick Buechner, with tongue in cheek, catches the flavor of this curious encounter:

> "That was all very well, Nicodemus said, but just how were you supposed to pull a thing like that off? How especially were you supposed to pull it off if you were pushing sixty-five? How did you get born again when it was a challenge just to get out of bed in the morning? He even got a little sarcastic. Could a man enter a second time into his mother's womb; he asked, when it was all he could do to enter a taxi without the driver coming around to give him a shove from behind?" (Peculiar Treasures, p. 122)

Now a funny thing happens at this point in the story. After Nicodemus asks for clarity about this "born again" business, Jesus launches into a homily about spiritual birth, and the wind blowing where it wants to blow. And then Jesus stops talking the author takes over. The dialogue ends, voice-over commentary begins. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." May I paraphrase? "God loves the Nicodemuses of this world so much that he gave Jesus: so that the Nicodemuses don't have to watch their waning years trickle through their fingers like dry ashes, but instead might live fully, thor-

oughly, joyfully, eternally." The author of the fourth gospel wants Nicodemus to remind us of the dynamic of God's love which is capable of saving us from death in the midst of life - and in the process capable of saving the world. The basic Christian assertion is this: the creator God views the world and every creature in it with love; not with hostility, enmity; not with skepticism; not with bemused neutrality; not with judgment, but with love.

Something so central and so simple is bound not to be understood. Thus the theologians issue a warning before they start discussing God's love. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: "When we talk about love we have to become mature or we will become sentimental." (Love and Justice, p. 35). Hans Kung was graphic. "What theologians say about love sometimes feels like cold water running down one's back." (Does God Exist, p. 693). My favorite, however, came from a professor of homiletics who said most preachers are inclined to get lost in a "romantic fog" when they start in on the three Greek words for love.

I will resist the temptation, therefore, to add to the cumulative burden church goers bear in this regard, by not talking about eros, philia, and agape one more time. I would, however, like to suggest again that we do have

fundamental problems with our religion's fundamental assertion about God loving the world in general and us in particular.

There is something in us that insists that you have to feel bad before you can feel good, and that it is at least part of the function of religion to help illuminate that which is bad. There is something in us that insists that God might be inclined to love the world and us, but there have to be major improvements on both fronts before he can get around to it. There is something in most of us which resists the Gospel at the fundamental point.

Beyond that, there is something safe and comfortable about that traditional religious posture which regards the world and God as rivals, if not enemies. "Worldly" sounds like it ought to be the opposite of "Godly," and in fact a lot of religion acts as if that is the case, as if the world and all it represents is one of God's mistakes. Thus religion is an escape from the world, a respite, a haven, a safe port from everything that is secular, physical, material, sensitive - worldly.

And finally, there is something in us that wants to privatize God's love, which is essentially a denial of love's power to change us. We can cope with the idea that God actually does love us, by turning that love into a manageable emotion, that sentimentality Neibuhr warned about, that romantic fog. Religion, when it becomes solely personal, quickly becomes a sticky piety which walks alone in the garden with Jesus without acknowledging the world of flesh and blood human beings outside the garden wall: a piety which gets excited about gestures like innocuous prayers in school class rooms, while failing to see the connection between a God of love and existence of hungry children.

God's love is intentional, dynamic, powerful. It's purpose is to change things, in the world, and in our lives.

The Bible shocks us by what it means when it says, "God is love." Ronald Goetz wrote, "It doesn't mean that God is composed of some abstract meta-physical stuff called love. It means quite simply: God is a lover. In the very specificity of human existence on earth God has been found loving." (Christian Century, 3/17/76, p. 245)

God wants to change us by loving. The dynamic of God's love is not limited to making us feel good. It's purpose is to change our lives in a way that will change the world around us. It's a conspiracy actually, the purpose of which is to set off a revolution of love in your life.

The psychologists understand the connection between being loved and loving. They are teaching us that the capacity to love is called out of us in infancy by those earliest realizations that we will be fed when hungry, and made warm and safe, that someone does indeed care deeply for us. And tragically, we are learning that when that dynamic is not there, the individual may never know how to love. We have seen the ghastly results of the opposite: how abused children become abusing parents, because violence has replaced love at that basic place in the emerging personality.

So, your rebirth and mine, begins not necessarily with emotional cataclism or moral crisis, but with the deep realization that against all the odds, in the face of all the contrary reasons we are loved: there is a God who cares deeply about us. And so, your continuing growth and mine, our life itself, depends on the nourishment of that surprising love of God. ~~meat and drink, for us, here represented by bread and wine.~~

"The people to whom the Gospel is to speak today," writes Yale Professor William Muehl, "are not huddled fearfully in the shadow of ancient altars...they are rather wandering about aimlessly, troubled by the increasing suspicion that no one literally gives a damn about what they do..." (All the Damed Angels, p. 38)

Muehl tells a story about a Kindergardener, meeting his parents after the Christmas program at school and dropping and smashing the ceramic gift he had worked on for weeks and then wailing in despair. His father said, "It doesn't matter, son." But his mother, wiser, knelt and hugged him close and said, "Of course it matters. It matters a great deal," and wept with him.

God so loves you; God so cares about you; God so wants to make a lover out of you - he gave his only son. That is the Gospel.

Nicodemus...? Nicodemus went on with his business for three years or so and was, along the way, reborn, a lover. We know that because on the day of the public execution of Jesus of Nazareth, Nicodemus appears again, with his friend Joesph, going to the tomb to pay his respects. This time he came in the broad light of day. (see Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, Nicodemus, p. 123)

Prayer Gratitude for God's love
Pray for peace - victims of war - Germany
Illness & hunger - make us lovers -